

DEBATE

The League of Arab States, concerned by the diverse reactions caused in the Arab world by the publication of Antoine C. Mattar's article, "The Arabic Language and Present Conditions and Prospects for the Future of the Arabic-Speaking World" in Diogenes No. 83 (Fall 1973), pages 64-76, has sent to the editors of the magazine their response, published below, which was prepared at their request by Dr. Abdel Sabbour Chahine and which represents their point of view. The editors of Diogenes are very pleased to publish their answer and remind its readers that the opinions published are the sole responsibility of the author and the League of Arab States.

Mr. Mattar's article raises the general problem of Arabic in the contemporary Arab world. It hinges upon the two following issues: first, a critique and analysis of the linguistic situation that, according to the author, obtains in Arab countries, on the levels of both information and education; secondly, on new perspectives—in terms of certain suggestions which the author considers as possible solutions to the problem.

It would be unfair to ignore the personal judgements and general conclusions expressed in the article, for they are closely connected with our linguistic situation; the author is, moreover, an eminent personality and his experience in the field of linguistics is undeniable. However, it is regrettable that he has been

Translated by Rosanna Rowland

unable to free himself from some of the prejudices invariably encountered when we approach the linguistic problem that is posed in Arab countries. Mr. Mattar has indeed followed in the footsteps of certain writers, both ancient and modern, who tend to dramatize the problem by affirming that the underdeveloped state of the Arab world is maintained by the archaic character of the language.

“Arabic is not a modern language,” states the author—a truth which no-one contests—yet he draws the conclusion that Arabic “cannot *in its present state* serve as an efficient vehicle for an advanced culture, be it humanistic or technological.” He goes even further: “On the other hand Arabic, formerly an excellent vehicle for Greek philosophy, can no longer serve as a support for modern thought.” Mr. Mattar would have done better to quote a few examples of “modern thought” that Arabic would not be able to render. Instead of applying this scientific method, he confines himself to mentioning the three reasons that, according to him, account for the limitations of the Arabic language. These are:

1. “Arabic has maintained through the centuries a pronouncedly sacred character. For Moslems it is the language of Revelation, even for Turks, Indonesians, Pakistanis and others who do not understand it at all. But, whereas the latter possess a ‘profane’ national language as well as the sacred one, the Arabs do not.”
2. Arabic, the medium of an impressive past civilization, has remained attached to its ancient heritage as if it were never to be an historical means of expression.
3. On the one hand, the Arab world has been overtaken by socio-economic evolution, and on the other hand by the technological revolution, because it has remained cut off—for essentially political reasons—from the accelerated pace of contemporary scientific progress.

Let us therefore admit that the deficiencies of Arabic are the natural result of the large gap which separates the developed world from an Arab world which has been left behind. As for the “essentially political reasons,” it is above all a question of Western colonialism which, being hostile to the language and

culture of the Moslem world, has for a long time hampered the Arab contribution to universal progress. The Arabs thus became mere consumers of Western products, notably in the field of modern technology. A producer has all the freedom to impose his material produce and even his language upon the consumer. This drama is even more clearly apparent in Egyptian universities, for instance, where most of the sciences on which modern civilization is based, such as geometry, medicine, pharmacy, chemistry, physics and mathematics, are taught in English.

We are, however, forced to state that if such recourse is had to foreign languages, it is not because Arabic is inadequate, but because the teachers themselves are unable to use their own language to translate the progress achieved by scientific disciplines abroad. Not long ago I attended the defense of a doctoral thesis on Parasitology which clearly illustrates the dramatic situation in which we are living, at the very highest level of scientific research. The thesis was written in English; the author, an Egyptian student, presented the summary also in English. The debate began: the chairman then spoke in Arabic, one of the members of the judging committee expressed himself in English, another in Arabic, and when defending her thesis, the student used Arabic and English in turn.

This scene took place in the faculty of medicine of one of the Egyptian universities. If the same thesis had been presented at the University of Damascus, it would have been written and defended in Arabic, without problems either in the choice of technical terms or in its defense.

Let us state frankly and unambiguously that it is not the Arab language which is an inadequate means of expression; it is rather a cultural and moral default of certain university teachers. Either they have an imperfect knowledge of their own mother-tongue, or, if they know it well, they avoid using it. Such an attitude reveals a certain lack of national dignity: whereas a soldier does not hesitate to face the worst dangers in the defense of his own country, nothing seems able to motivate these teachers to make an effort to overcome the difficulty.

A language is above all a practical matter and a reflection of life. In ancient times it would gradually and mysteriously become enriched and more complete. Man had not as yet developed a vocation for inventing words; he selected words according to

his inclination, accepting pleasant sounds and rejecting those which hurt the ear. But today, in our developed world, language has become a "product" of computers and electronic brains. In one of its reports the permanent Bureau for the Co-ordination of Work on Arabization states that a fully evolving language gains at least fifty scientific words per day. As for Arabic, it must come to terms with this significant verbal contribution by Arabization, by translation, or even by borrowing from foreign languages: that is to say by using every available means to assimilate new terms. Thus the Arabic vocabulary has become a "product," taken over by the academies, universities, and cultural institutions. But a product is useless without consumers. Such was the unfortunate fate of terms coined by Arab academies that did not even outlast the very day of their birth. In our opinion it seems that these institutions hardly have any clear idea of their share of responsibility in the contemporary cultural world.

Mr. Mattar is mistaken equally when he considers that the dual nature of Arabic, which is both the language of Revelation and of daily life, has considerably diminished its use in modern life, and when he suggests that the Moslem peoples would encounter the greatest difficulties did they not have recourse to another "secular" national language spoken alongside the sacred and religious one. His conclusions seem premature for two reasons. First, the fact that non-Arab Moslems possess national languages has not resolved the cultural problems that confront them. Indeed, Indonesian, Urdu, and Turkish lag behind and suffer from the same underdevelopment as the rest of the world's languages (about 100) with the exception of a few which are considered as having adapted to scientific and industrial civilization. Secondly, the fact that Arabic is the language of Revelation does not mean that for a Moslem it is divine in character, or that it is confined to religious texts. Arabic is a human language that has evolved to the extent of embracing the Revelation—the zenith of what human language can express. But this language, "medium of the Revelation" has been equally able to express the complete opposite. Both in distant times and the present it has transmitted the moral thought of the Orient and the philosophical thought of the West, and it has united the knowledge of the other world and this. Is this

flexibility of Arabic a sign of strength, or, on the contrary, of weakness? For Mr. Matter, the fact that Arabic is the medium of an original civilization makes it strictly dependent upon its ancient heritage and hinders its adaptation to modern life: thus it would be a language of the past but not of the future. It seems to me that in this Mr. Mattar is remaining faithful to the tenets of his culture, which sees in religions the shackles of liberty, the source of myths, and a passive adherence to the Word that is incompatible with the tendency of modern civilization. This conception of the religious language would be admissible were Arabic the first language of The Holy Book: The Bible. Indeed, in Western eyes religion is nothing but a collection of prejudice, ancient myths and traditions which constitute, moreover, the reason for the revolt of several European countries against religion, the successive movements of reform, the outright rejection of religious thought, or indifference towards it.

But the causes of non-Arab religious conflict are not our topic, and Mr. Mattar is certainly better acquainted with them than I. We can see, however, that Islamic civilization does not essentially rest upon absolute judgements, upon myths or traditionalism, even if one concedes that certain traces of them are betrayed by particular periods of Islamic history—above all in its latterday age of decadence.

The latter cannot, therefore, represent a fetter that prevents the Arabs from “integrating with the dynamic spirit (of the civilization of the Word) in order to attain the civilization of the Word and Action, and enter upon the technological realm.” It is our opinion that what shackles the Arabs’ development is the very nature of the historical stage through which they are at present passing. At this point they are striving to affirm their liberty and independence with a view to widening the confines of progress. Consequently the solution to the linguistic problem in the Arab world is not to be sought at all in bilingualism, that is to say in having simultaneously a sacred Islamic language and another secular one facilitating intercourse. The proposed bilingualism masks a project cherished by the foes of Islam: that of alienating Moslem Arabs from the Koran by the adoption of a profane language in order, ultimately, to turn the words of this book into dead, if holy, letters.

BILINGUALISM AND PLURALITY

These remarks will be explained by an acquaintance with the way in which the article continues with a description of the linguistic situation of the Arab world, as a whole. The author is not simply content, as had been others before him, to mention the crisis of bilingualism which afflicts the Arab, who speaks a dialect, but writes a literary language. In describing the situation that exists across the vast expanse of the Arab world, he emphasizes the linguistic plurality by which it is personified. Certain researchers, such as Mr. Wilcox and Mr. Salama Mussa, have worked on this problem in the context of Egypt, since at the time they were writing there was still no Arab unity from the Atlantic to the Persian Gulf. For this reason exposing the linguistic situation in Egypt at that time was in a way favorable to the enemies of Arabic. Today, when the communications media have reduced the distances between the Arab countries, and when political events give grounds for the belief that a certain unity will be created between them, partial or total, the problem of "linguistic plurality" poses itself for Mr. Mattar in the following manner:

"Arabic Languages"	}	classical literature (written, not spoken)	
		modern literature (written, not spoken —mass media)	
	}	Dialects (spoken, not written)	Algerian dialect Syrian dialect Egyptian dialect Saudi dialect Iraki dialect Moroccan dialect Jordanian dialect etc.

Directly after this the author states: "This plurality severs the Arab-speaking language-groups from their "human environment" and makes it very difficult to bring about the phenomenon of Osmosis, which is of particular importance at the mass-media level."

There, at the very moment when he was about to touch upon the truth, he retreats, preferring to give much greater significance to the problem of communication in Arabic. Instead of viewing it, as he does, from the point of view of linguistic plurality, had his concern for objectivity been greater he would have been able to consider it simply as a difference of level at the heart of one and the same language. Between what the author calls "the Arabic Languages" there exist only small and relative differences on the linguistic level, variations according to time and place but not in essence. There can be no doubt that as far as our literature is concerned the distance between the ancient and modern epochs is no greater, from the philological point of view, than that existing between two given periods of a European literature, even though we measure the antiquity of others in centuries and of ourselves in dozens of centuries.

After more than fifteen centuries Arabic literature has lost none of its freshness and clarity, while, in Europe, literary works written hardly two centuries ago are already dated, because the language in which they are written is different from that of the present day. One could say, for example, that 18th century English is not that of the 20th century, just as the French of the Revolution is different from that of today. On the other hand, it can be claimed that in the case of Arabic the gap between ancient and modern does not exist, unless we wish to support the view that there are as many languages as there are individuals. Although it lies outside our present scope, such a perspective allows us to understand the diversity of dialectal variations which are fundamentally no more than inflections of certain phonetic modes or word-meanings that mutate from one dialect to another according to local or foreign influences.

At the popular level the spread of information has certainly contributed to a reduction of the distance between Arab dialects, from Morocco to Omân, even though it has come about unintentionally—apparently through the widespread use of transistors and long-range broadcasting. In the light of the results obtained in this area one could suppose that the bonds between the Arab peoples will be drawn tighter if the spread of information continues to strengthen the linguistic consciousness of the masses and to propagate a simplified literary pronunciation by eschewing flawed dialectal traits. In reference to this theme I will cite

Sa'id Al-Afghani and his work *min bâder el-lughat el-'arabiyya* (On the present state of the language). Speaking of the notable differences that existed a short time ago between the dialects of Damascus and Beirut, the author writes: "Seventy years ago, when people journeyed on the backs of animals, when there were neither roads nor communications, an illiterate citizen of Damascus and an inhabitant of Beirut understood one another with difficulty, although the two cities were but 100 kilometers apart. Each had its own dialect, with its distinct vocabulary, expressions and pronunciation. An illiterate Damascan of today, whether he be commenting on politics, the rise in prices or the news, will use the same words as a radio announcer, a writer or a doctor. Ask him about the contents of a newspaper or the subject of a speech, and his replies will show amply that nothing has escaped him. Indeed, the changes of custom have certainly brought the illiterate man closer to the literary language..."

THE SPOKEN AND THE WRITTEN LANGUAGE

In order to make the linguistic problem more comprehensible, Mr. Mattar underscores the fact that the ancient or modern literary language is a written and not a spoken one: a paradoxical situation, it would seem. He then wonders: "What chance of survival does a language that is written and not spoken have at the end of the 20th century? And of what is a written, un-spoken, language constituted if it is not a few historical and folkloric elements that are ultimately the sum-total of traditions which are, at the very least, static and oriented towards the past?" In posing this question, the author seems to be suggesting that the literary language be abandoned in favor of a written dialect. But he does not expressly state this, so as not to produce "a new recruit to the succession of dialectal partisans." These are numerous, notably in Lebanon, where the director of a publishing house, Mr. Sa'id 'Aql, is demanding the "Latinization" of Arabic script and the adoption of the Lebanese dialect as the common language of writing and communication. Such a project is suspect and appears condemned to failure in advance. For this reason the author feels that it would be wrong to join this cause, and prefers to leave the question open.

But perhaps Mr. Mattar does not know, or pretends not to

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know, that the existence of Arabic is bound up with the Koran, and that for a Moslem this book is no mere collection of "ceremonial religious songs." Even for a somewhat tepid Moslem the Koran is a way of life, an article of civilization. On the linguistic level it still remains a kind of divine guarantee of the continuity of Arabic, a springboard for its desired flight.

RICHNESS AND PLURALITY

Mr. Mattar reproaches Arabic for its abundance of synonyms, which he considers a sign of weakness. To him, the Arab, who has several words by which to translate such olden terms as *assad* (lion) or *saiif* (sword), finds himself bereft of modern scientific terms.

It is quite natural for Arabic to possess a large number of words having almost the same meaning, because it is a very ancient tongue; this abundance of synonyms does not prevent it however, thanks to academic congresses, from taking what it requires from other languages, particularly in the realm of science. The recourse to foreign languages is plainly sufficient on condition that Arabic teaching institutions take the matter seriously, promptly applying themselves to the Arabization of scientific language and urging the universities to apply a systematic plan. As scientific contacts with foreign countries are constantly changing, and the linguistic roots of science are not solely confined to English, the Arabization of scientific language is becoming an unavoidable necessity that must sooner or later triumph. If all Arab teachers addressed their pupils in the language in which they themselves had studied abroad, these students would end up knowing every modern tongue except Arabic. On the contrary, it is the foreign sources themselves that will have to come and henceforth enrich the Arab language, no matter what the difficulties of the operation.

THE RIGHT LOGIC FOR THE LANGUAGE

Every language possesses its particular logic which allows it to fulfill its function as a means of expression. From a linguistic viewpoint no one language can imitate another. It only achieves

its ends by fully incorporating what is understood into a practical vocabulary. In Arabic the figurative sense, *majaz*, with its different interpretations, has played a major role in the evolution of important words. This evolution has, however, always been slow since it stems from the very nature of language, which is characterized by its constancy at the same time that it tends to change. If the need of expression entails the development of the language, and if the subject matter of expression ceaselessly changes, it follows that whoever expresses himself in Arabic can employ the vocabulary at his disposal in complete freedom: to the extent that the sense of the words allows him and that he succeeds in conveying his message to others. The development of language, thanks to the evolution of the figurative sense, is an important phenomenon which affects word-meanings in all modern languages. When this occurs, it is as though the figurative sense at once aroused in the hearer a kind of surprise through the revelation of an unusual usage. It creates, therefore, a kind of "slackening" between the denoting word, *dal*, and the denoted sense, *madlul*. Then, with time, as a consequence of the frequent use of the figurative meaning, this effect disappears and the (new) denoted sense springs to mind as soon as the denoting word is pronounced. This phenomenon, which is displayed by all languages, is not a failing to be ascribed to Arabic, as our author would have us believe. He curiously reproaches Arabic for having several affirmative forms, of which he mentions six, and declares that such peculiarities are not presented by more evolved languages. One can only wonder why, for example, if such similarities did not exist between Arabic and English, which one should imitate the other? The author equally criticizes Arabic for its poverty of tense forms, whereas the majority of languages possess complete forms which give precise expression to temporal relationships. As far as we are concerned the only necessary characteristic of Arab syntax is that it be able to achieve its ends according to its own logic. As long as it has existed, Arabic has achieved them on every level of expression by the use of two tenses, the past and future. In no area of human expression does Arabic seem to experience the least difficulty in expressing temporal relationships. Mr. Mattar cites fairly simple examples: "In Arabic, we travel can equally well mean we will travel" ... "Whichever one

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understands there is only a slight relative nuance between them, for the present is not a principle tense. It is, in fact, an imaginary line separating such time as lies in the future from that which is past. There is consequently no confusion as to tense in Arabic, as the author would have us believe. Furthermore, it is in no way necessary for Arabic to possess, as does French, thirteen or fourteen tenses to give more exact expression of the past in the future or the future in the past, for these can be precisely rendered by the compound tense.

ALPHABET AND SCRIPT

I will take Mr. Mattar to task most on the count of his criticism of the Arabic way of writing: the facts, for example, that only consonants and not vowels are indicated, that the word-endings inflect, and that number is specified in a tedious variety of ways (*tamyizu'l-'adad*).

Such linguistic phenomena are obviously as unamenable to any logic as they are to any criticism or justification. There is no cause for pride in the fact that a language is written with the aid of both vowels and consonants, any more than discredit to Arabic in the fact that it is written with consonants and without vowels. In the same way one could not criticize any such irregularity in a European language, because "languages are made that way."

Over and above this, in the phenomenon of declension, in the succession of modifications undergone by words according to their function and their case in a phrase, we linguists see a mark of perfection, not an indication of weakness.

I will even go so far as to say that amid all this abundant complexity I find an attempt to support a thesis by studied arguments, none of which has been convincing up to now.

Let us see, for example, how Mr. Mattar criticizes the Arabic manner of writing numbers: "It is useful, finally, to point out that Arabic is read and written from right to left, with the exception of numerals, which are written and read from left to right even when the numbers are inserted into a text." This argument does not hold very forcibly when one knows that if a number is translated into words it can be read or written from

right or left. For example, we are in the year One Thousand Three Hundred and Ninety Four of the Hegira (1394), or equally well in the year Ninety Four Three Hundred and One Thousand (*arba' un wa tes' un wa thalathu - mé'aten wa alf*). The second version is certainly the ancient one.

AND FINALLY

Mr. Mattar's article provides us with a statistical table of the world's languages in which Arabic hardly seems to occupy any place in terms of the world's cultural output, according to which Japanese outstrips French (11% for the first, 9% for the second). Discussing these data, Mr. Mattar states that the unflattering position of Arabic stems from the language's slow evolution, which slowness is due to the absence of any true cultural productivity. This reasoning proceeds in a vicious circle, which stems from an erroneous conception according to which a language evolves through errors. Furthermore, the errors committed in the course of linguistic exchange compromise the latter itself, attenuate it, and this attenuation produces new errors in its turn... To break out of this vicious circle it seems to us reasonable to say that the low level of Arab creativity is due to the fact that the Arabs themselves are advancing only slowly along the road of progress. For, if the Arabs "held the reins of civilization," they would possess a more evolved language, to the admiration of such scholars as Mr. Mattar.

As a remedy, the latter proposes a vigorous shake-up of the educational system in the Arab world. The syllabus for teaching Arabic would thereby be reduced, and the author's cherished proposal would be adopted: to enable the creation of a daily language "culled" from "archaic" Arabic, thus eliminating everything to do with the ancient origins of the language and the wealth of successive contributions made to it. Here I will allow myself one question to Mr. Mattar: "At all levels of teaching in France, do not French syllabi include studies bearing upon all the departments of culture that relate to the linguistic heritage: rhetoric, historical narratives, works of the great authors such as Rousseau, Voltaire, Hugo, La Fontaine, etc...? Now, upon entering professional life, does the French student

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use the knowledge acquired during such a heavy course of study in any way that an Arab student does not also?" Mr. Mattar does not seem to know that education cannot confine itself to the satisfaction of the student's demands, and that in fact it offers him one hundred per cent so that he may retain twenty per cent at his disposal, and not twenty so that he may use five.

This having been said, Mr. Mattar recognises, in certain passages of his study, the flexibility and potential of Arabic. He likewise underlines the fact that the modernization of Arabic depends essentially upon the creative effort of Arabic-speaking scholars and thinkers. This creativity moreover, transcends the competence simply of linguists, who will have to collaborate with the specialists of the various disciplines in the compilation of a series of glossaries for every level of education. This call for a modernization of Arabic through a close collaboration between scientists and linguists is one of the most interesting ideas advanced by the author.

If one had to sum up the impact of this article in a few words, it would be proper to note the seriousness of the analysis, the occasionally excessive enthusiasm, and the exhaustively detailed examination. The author has lacked only a better insight into the fundamental problem and a freedom from prejudice that must constitute an obstacle to every critical effort.